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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000284

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KIRF KISL KPAO AJ

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI MUSLIM IVP'ER CAUGHT UP IN MNS
LITERATURE SWEEP

REF: A. BAKU 00195
¶B. 07 BAKU 01496

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Azerbaijani Islamic commentator Elshad Miri told the Embassy that Ministry of National Security (MNS) officers raided his office on February 27, shortly after he returned from the U.S., where he participated in an International Visitors Program (IVP) for Azerbaijani Muslim believers. Miri is a young, devout Islamic scholar who has published approximately 20 books (primarily translations of books by Turkish authors) and administers a website on Islamic issues.

(Miri's theological orientation is toward the Turkish brand of Nurcu Islam, but he has disavowed any close allegiance with any one Sunni school of jurisprudence.) Miri said the MNS officers confiscated two computers, copies of a video he helped produce by providing some voice-over assistance, business cards, and many books. The MNS officers confiscated the video because it contained a map of the Iranian Sassanid empire, which labeled the territory of present-day Azerbaijan as "Armenia." Miri told us that none of his books are illegal, and when he asked the MNS officers why his office was being raided, the officers cited the map issue. Miri told us he might publicize the raid based on the grounds that he had not done anything illegal, but the MNS told him to keep quiet.

¶2. (C) The MNS officers -- accompanied by a representative from the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) -- subsequently took Miri to the neighborhood near the Abu Bakr Mosque and showed him several booksellers who had copies of Miri's books. (The GOAJ often points to the Abu Bakr mosque as a hotbed of "Wahhabism.") It appears the raid against Miri's office was part of a broader MNS sweep against booksellers near the mosque, as local press reported that MNS and SCWRA representatives raided several Muslim bookstores near the mosque on February 26. SCWRA spokesperson Yaqut Aliyeva confirmed the raid, stating that 559 illegal books had been seized.

¶3. (C) Miri was upset and angry about the raid, particularly after returning from America where he said he witnessed authentic religious freedom for Muslims. Miri said he had no idea if the authorities would return the confiscated computers and books.

¶4. (C) Comment: The GOAJ -- particularly the MNS -- has been stepping up pressure against religiously observant Muslims over the past six to nine months. In Baku and

several regions outside the capital, MNS officers, Ministry of Internal Affairs officials, and other local officials reportedly have detained observant Muslims, forcibly shaved some Muslims' beards, confiscated literature, and insulted some believers. While GOAJ officials have used these tactics for years, the GOAJ appears to have increased the pressure recently. Several of the Embassy's Islamic contacts have reported that observant Muslims are fearful of the increased pressure and believe the GOAJ may be using alleged terrorist threats as a pretext to exert pressure on religiously observant citizens. The GOAJ's efforts appeared to pick up steam particularly after the late 2007 threat against the Embassy, although the level of pressure may have relaxed a bit since late 2007.

¶5. (C) Comment continued: As we have reported (ref a), genuine pockets of radical extremism exist in Azerbaijan. To date, they are isolated and have limited means. There is no question, however, that the GOAJ is concerned and is reacting; as President Aliyev bluntly told the Ambassador (ref b), he does not want to see the degree of Islamization of the society increase and does not believe Turkey is a model for Azerbaijan. The Russian Ambassador recently told us that the GOAJ is not just concerned, but "afraid" of increasing extremist influence, a concern Russia shares with a view to Dagestan. We are increasingly concerned that the GOAJ's tough tactics to counter extremism do not differentiate between religiously observant Muslims and radical extremists. A variety of local contacts agree that the GOAJ's aggressive tactics, coupled with the broader lack of political freedoms in Azerbaijan, will worsen extremism by alienating devout Muslims and broadening the pool of people who are susceptible to extremist doctrines. A key Embassy

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contact and former Fulbrighter, Nарiman Gasimoglu, told us he had been approached by the SCWRA Chairman for advice on how to address the problem. Gasimoglu noted that the SCWRA appears to want to do the right thing -- ie. supporting tolerant and peaceful forms of religion, while fighting extremism -- but does not seem to know how to do it.
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